

Rose Wild
Feedback editor
The Times
The News Building,
1 London Bridge Street,
London SE1 9GF.

Our reference: 09296-15

Tuesday 15 December 2015

Dear Ms Wild,

I refer to your response to my letter dated 27 November in relation to my complaint to Ipso, reference as above.

You have provided answers to three questions put to you by the regulator.

I have noted the answers offered in response to questions about the steps taken prior to publication to ensure the accuracy of the headline and the placing of the correction in the newspaper. I will return to these later on in this letter.

I would first like to address the issue of the headline, the article content and your response to the question about breaching Clause 1 of the Editors' Code of Practice.

You argue that no breach of Clause 1 has occurred. You pointed to the content of the article, the context of the poll questions and the availability of data to the contrary about the numbers of Muslims who have travelled to Syria to join groups other than ISIL, in your defence of no breach being committed.

1. You state that critical voices occupied half the published article. I disagree. The comment attributed to Arzu Merali is the only contribution that addresses the poll. The quote from Sadiq Khan, and taken from The Sun op-ed piece, reinforced that paper's misleading portrayal of the poll results, hinging as it does on the mistaken figure of "1 in 5". The quote from Dr Shuja Shafi refers to the timing of the poll and not to the poll results themselves. A further reference to a letter submitted by a group of imams to The Times newspaper, again, has little bearing on the poll. The letter iterates a condemnation of killing in the name of Islam by a group of Muslim scholars. This content may well have been considered interesting but it does not, in my view, suggest that the article as a whole was "balanced".
2. You claim the article gave "full weight to reservations" about the poll. There is one sentence in the penultimate paragraph of the article which highlights the framing of the question in the poll and the misleading manner in which it was subsequently reported. This is a stark contrast to the prominence afforded to the misleading headline.
3. You claim the article was "accurate and balanced". I refute the former and in consideration of the latter, I would like to point out that while the poll conducted by Sky News in March was

mentioned in the article, referring to the decline in numbers expressing sympathy for young Muslims who join fighters in Syria, a key aspect of that poll was overlooked. Indeed, Survation in its own commentary about the polls, in March and in November, have stated:

“Interestingly, when we polled the remainder of the British population in March, 4% of non-Muslims expressed “a lot of sympathy with young Muslims who leave the UK to join fighters in Syria” and 9% expressed “some sympathy”, suggesting that attitudes held by the Muslim and non-Muslim populations are not that different.”

Any balance to be had in reporting the Survation poll would have had to take consideration of the control group used to contextualise the responses given by Muslim respondents. You failed to do this.

4. You have said that media reports in recent years have focused on the numbers of British Muslims joining ISIL and that the numbers joining other factions (pro-Assad, anti-ISIL) “are so small as to be insignificant”.

I would like to refer you to the evidence of Mr Charles Farr, who until recently was director of the Office for Security and Counter-Terrorism and is now chair of the Joint Intelligence Committee, to the Home Affairs select committee on 24 November (source: <http://data.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/committeeevidence.svc/evidencedocument/home-affairs-committee/countering-extremism/oral/25039.pdf>).

I have highlighted the detail of significance:

Charles Farr: The figures that I think are being shared most widely are the figures about the numbers of people of interest to the security service who have been to Syria and Iraq and the numbers who have come back. I suspect you have already had that. It is between 750 and 800 who have gone since the conflict began and about 50% of those have returned. Those are the really important numbers for us. *Not all those people, I would emphasise—because I think it has been misreported—have joined ISIL. That is a smaller subset of that group but, of course, a percentage certainly have.*

At a conference in June of this year, Mr Farr stated that the numbers of British Muslims who have travelled to Syria and Iraq numbered a “few hundred” adding, “It’s not to say the challenges they pose are not significant, they are. But ... the more we overstate them the more, frankly, we risk labelling Muslim communities as somehow intrinsically extremist, which actually despite an unprecedented wealth of social media propaganda, they have proved not to be. *So I think we need to be cautious with our metaphors and with our numbers.*”

You will notice the huge disparity between the numbers you quote in your letter, “from 700 to as many as 2000”, and the gulf between your understanding (from media reports) of those British Muslims who have joined ISIL and the actual numbers considered to have done so by the security services.

I hasten to add the observation by Mr Farr that there has been “mis-reporting” about the numbers who have joined ISIL. In the context of our present discussion on accuracy, I think that is very important to note.

Indeed, the gross effects of this “mis-reporting” are evident in the headline published by the paper on 24 November and in the response you have provided. The latter clearly illustrates the impact of “mis-reporting” about British Muslims who have travelled to Syria such that a question which did not specify ISIL (or ISIS) was erroneously identified in your headline and “mis-reporting” of the numbers involved cited in your defence of it.

I would argue that the headline was misleading and constituted a breach of Clause 1 of the Editors' Code of Practice. I further argue that the headline was a "significant inaccuracy" and one that was wilfully made in spite of robust public debate about The Sun's headline the previous day and its careless portrayal of the poll results. I do not consider the correction which appeared in the paper on Thursday 26 November as sufficient remedy to a breach of the Code and in particular, to the requirement that a breach be acknowledged with "due prominence".

I would like to refer this matter now to the regulator for resolution.

Yours sincerely,

Sufyan Ismail,
CEO.